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ABSTRACT

Although organized physical education is vital to Americans' health and well-being, surprisingly few policy studies exist for the field. Physical education professionals desperately need evaluation studies to assist them in setting policies and examining policy implementation and outcomes. This paper reviews available literature, identifies methodological issues in policy studies, and provides advice for addressing these issues. The four-point essay: (1) defines "policy"; (2) describes two basic types of policy studies; (3) defines four major issues in planning and conducting studies; and (4) discusses the application of the Joint Committee Standards (1981) to the planning and conducting of policy studies in physical education. The term "policy," using Thomas Green's definition, commands a very broad interpretation and may encompass priorities, goals, preset decisions, rules for decision-making, practice guides, and predispositions to respond in certain ways to common situations. To ensure that policies are equitable and effective, evaluative studies are needed to assist in policy formulation as well as evaluation. Methodological issues such as utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy encompass a host of problems threatening the success of policy studies. The Joint Committee's 30 standards were developed to address these four issues. Of particular importance are the standards on audience identification, object identification, political viability, and formal or written obligation standards. (MLH)

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# Methodological Issues in Policy Studies:

## with attention to policy issues in Physical Education

by

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Organized physical education is of vital importance to the health and welfare of Americans of all ages and to the U. S. society as a whole. This discipline carries a major responsibility for helping citizens to develop and maintain fitness, vigor, motor skills, and health-promoting habits of diet, exercise, and recreation. Such outcomes are crucial, considering the high level of heart disease, stress, and other maladies in the U. S. It is appropriate that the physical education field advance its contributions. As John Taylor said, networking is one way to do that. Another way is to study the physical education needs of the field's constituents, evaluate its programs and priorities, and strengthen its policies and services.

I am glad to join with this AERA special interest group to explore how physical educators can improve their evaluations of policies and programs. My assignment in the symposium is to identify methodological issues in policy studies and provide advice for addressing these issues.

In preparation for the symposium, I sought to review as much relevant material as possible. I wrote to the physical education specialists in each state and territorial department of education, to the major national organizations concerned with the field, and to about a dozen of the field's national leaders. I informed them of my assignment and asked for assistance in identifying recent and current studies concerned with policies in physical education. I also obtained the results from two library searches for the same material.

The haul from these information retrieval efforts was minuscule. Mainly, it consisted of a few position papers, quite a few apologetic letters, and only four policy studies. These included two assessments of fitness, one study of physical education requirements in higher education, and one study of the workloads of physical education instructors in higher education. Most

respondents said they knew of no policy studies concerned with physical education.

To supplement the information obtained from these efforts, I have reviewed the report of a 1976 International Congress on evaluation in physical education. The Congress was held in Finland and included representatives from seventeen countries. I gave the keynote address and reviewed the other 33 papers presented during the 5-day conference. I was impressed with the extent and quality of the evaluation work reported.

I am puzzled why my 1987 search for similar studies turned up only four studies. Perhaps the key issue in this symposium is not how to improve the quality of policy studies in physical education, but how to increase the number of such studies. Or, maybe I need to improve my abilities to locate and retrieve study reports.

In any case, I have prepared this four-part paper using the relevant information that I could find. In the first part of the paper, I define what I mean by the term "policy." In the second part I describe two basic types of policy studies. In the third part I define four major issues in planning and conducting studies. In the fourth and final part, I discuss how the Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects, and Materials (Joint Committee, 1981) can be applied in planning and conducting policy studies in physical education.

## Definition of Policy

Thomas Green (1982) has argued that, in order to cover the range of ordinary usage, the term policy must command a very broad interpretation. Accordingly, policy can mean priorities, goals, preset decisions, rules for decision making, guides to practice, and, in general, predispositions to respond in certain ways to common situations.

Given this broad definition, a host of policies in physical education and sport come to mind. To help us think together in this area, let me provide a few examples.

One is the formal public prescription by a state or national agency (for example, how many hours of physical education instruction must be offered weekly to each student or to a certain group of students, such as those with handicaps). Other policies are a state's prescribed academic requirements for certifying teachers of physical education, also their rules governing the participation of transfer students in organized sports. Another example is the strategic plan of a professional association of physical educators (e.g., the positions to be argued and the approach to be followed in lobbying for or against given legislation). Another example policy is the section in a school district's policy handbook that prescribes the amount, content, and sequence of physical education offerings. Another policy is seen in the rules of thumb a coach uses to prepare his team for athletic competitions (for example, play the next game before discussing the one to follow it; or, in preparing for a Friday game, practice hard on Wednesday and light on Thursday). As a final example, an athletic conference's unwritten agreement that basketball is a contact sport and that referees should call few fouls is a policy familiar to Big 10 basketball fans.

These are all predispositions to act in certain ways in given types of situations, and they are therefore policies. It doesn't matter whether they are written or officially adopted. If they are used repeatedly to guide actions, they are policies.

Moreover, all such policies are potential topics for evaluation. They help determine what services are provided and how they are delivered. The policies may be effective or of no consequence. They may have side effects

that are positive or harmful. They may be equitable or discriminatory. They may be sound on paper but flawed in practice. They may be very good and beneficial and only in need of validation. For these and related reasons, government agencies, professional associations, school boards, teachers, coaches, and others need to obtain evaluative feedback they can use to guide the formulation, implementation, and improvement of the policies and guide their work.

Types of Policy Studies

So, what kinds of policy studies do these groups need?

Basically, I believe they need feedback from two main types of evaluative studies. Each type can be broken down into subtypes; but for the purpose of this presentation, it is sufficient to look only at the major division.

The first type includes studies to assist in the formulation of policies. Examples include needs assessments aimed at revealing deficiencies (for example, in the fitness of mentally handicapped children), and evaluations of program plans (for example, a critical comparison of a given state's plan for physical education with that of a country where fitness test results are better). Such studies can assist in formulating goals, selecting plans, allocating resources, assigning responsibilities, and motivating public and government support. The aim of all these studies is to assist in formulating or revising policies.

This type of study seems about as common as morel mushrooms in Michigan in July. There may be some around; but, if so, they are very hard to find. There were only a few of these studies in the Finland report; and, in a more general context, Gerald Bracey (1982) reported that studies that influence policy are rare throughout education. Nevertheless, new policies do get formulated and adopted. More often than not, the policies are generated

through a political process or are personally determined. Rarely do research or evaluation studies guide the formulation of the policies. One way physical educators could strengthen their policy development work is to conduct more studies aimed at guiding and informing the policy development process.

The second type of policy study is more prevalent in physical education. It includes studies to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of given policies. These studies come into play after a policy has been enacted. They examine the implementation and effectiveness of the policy. They provide feedback to assist in program management, information for accountability reports, and stimulation for revising policies. Sometimes these studies are called process and product evaluations. Most of the studies reported at the Finland conference were of this second type.

Methodological Issues in Policy Studies

Now that you have some idea of how I define policy and the kinds of policy studies I have in mind, I turn to the main topic of this paper. It concerns key methodological issues in policy studies. In other words, if you are planning a policy study, what issues should you anticipate and what mistakes should you avoid?

The most comprehensive response to these questions is embodied in the Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects, and Materials (Joint Committee, 1981). These standards were developed by a 17-member committee representing twelve professional societies concerned with evaluations in education. The Standards are appropriate for application to policy studies, because, as illustrated above, policy studies essentially are evaluations. In developing the standards, the Joint Committee identified and

addressed four general issues in evaluation work. These issues concern the utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy of evaluation studies. I will comment briefly about each of the issues.

The problem regarding **utility** is that many evaluations are designed, conducted, and reported so that they are of little interest or use to any particular client group. The Joint Committee identified many mistakes that can work against utility. A study might be focused on questions that are of no particular interest to anyone but the evaluator. The evaluators might fail to earn the confidence of the intended audience. The obtained information might be too general or too narrow. The basis for judgments and recommendations might be obscure or unacceptable to the audience. The reports might be unclear, delivered too late, or not disseminated at all. Finally, the investigator might be unwilling or unable to assist the client to apply the findings. All such mistakes and shortcomings limit or impair the utility of an evaluation. They must be avoided if evaluations are to contribute beneficially to the development and implementation of policies.

At the outset, if you know that no one would use the results from a proposed study, then you should not conduct it. A study not worth doing isn't worth doing well.

The second major issue addressed by the Joint Committee Standards concerns the **feasibility** of study plans and procedures. This issue is that evaluators often fail to consider the constraints and hazards in the evaluation situation. Consequently, their study might be seriously hampered or compromised, or it might have to be abandoned in mid-stream. One common problem is the inappropriate use of experimental design. Often, the requirements of such designs cannot be met in field settings; or, if the requirements are met, the findings are necessarily too narrow to address the client's

questions. Another problem is the failure to recognize and address pertinent political pitfalls. The evaluation might be resisted or even sabotaged by one or more groups that fear its consequences. A final feasibility problem is that studies sometimes waste resources, either through inefficiency or by collecting useless information.

Next, we look at the third issue: **propriety.** The core failings here are that studies sometimes are conducted illegally or unethically. If there is no written confirmation, working agreements might be abrogated. If conflicts of interest are not identified and controlled, decisions affecting the study or write-up of results might be compromised. In the face of embarrassing findings, clients might censor, distort, or withhold reports, sometimes with the complicity of the evaluator. The rights of participants in the study might be violated, especially by failing to obtain their informed consent before collecting information that pertains to their personal characteristics or performance. Reports are sometimes biased in their presentation of strengths or weaknesses. And sometimes evaluation funds are misappropriated.

The fourth and final issue is **accuracy.** It involves problems that combine to produce erroneous findings. The accuracy of results is often compromised in a number of different ways. The evaluator and client might fail to clearly define the policy issue or program to be studied. The report might overlook contextual factors that influenced the findings. Changes in the study purposes and procedures might be made for good reasons, but not properly documented and considered in interpretations of findings. The samples of respondents might be unrepresentative. The data-gathering procedures and instruments might lack sufficient validity, reliability, and objectivity. If the procedures for coding, storing, and retrieving information are loose, data may be lost or improperly coded. The results might be analyzed with

inappropriate procedures. And, the evaluator might go far beyond the bounds of the available findings in generating conclusions and recommendations. Many of these mistakes are under the control of the evaluator. On the other hand, evaluators lack the controls that are customary in laboratory research and must, therefore, make special efforts to overcome the problems of field studies. Most emphatically, evaluators must present their clients with an honest account of the limitations and shortcomings of their studies.

This concludes my account of the issues of utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy. Clearly, these four issues encompass a host of problems that threaten the success of policy studies. I turn next to the Joint Committee Standards, which were constructed to help evaluators address these issues.

Applying the Joint Committee Standards

The 30 standards are divided according to the four issues. There are eight utility standards, three feasibility standards, eight propriety standards, and eleven accuracy standards.

Each standard presents and explicates an objective to be achieved in evaluation work, e.g., to obtain reliable measurements. The content of the standard explains what criteria must be satisfied in order to achieve the objective, what common errors should be avoided, and what procedures can be of assistance. Each standard also includes an illustration of how it applies in a sample evaluation.

I will comment about four of the standards that are particularly helpful in planning policy studies. That's all I can discuss in the available time; but, hopefully, you'll get a general idea of how the entire set of standards can be used to plan policy studies.

First, I want to discuss the very first standard in the Utility set. It is the Audience Identification standard. This standard directs the evaluator

to identify and rank order the audiences for the study, then to ask them to identify the most important study questions. Moreover, the evaluator might engage an advisory group representing the different audiences to provide reactions and advice throughout the course of the study. By using the advice from this standard, evaluators are helped to focus their studies on questions that are important to a defined client group and to meaningfully engage representatives of that group in conducting the study. These are crucially important steps towards conducting the right study and conducting it so that its results will be valued and used, not only by the investigator, but especially by the decision makers.

The second standard I want to consider is the first one in the Accuracy set. It is the Object Identification standard. It directs the evaluator to carefully describe the policy or program to be studied so that later the client group will be able to gain a clear idea of what was evaluated, its different forms, and how it changed during the study. Basically, this standard counsels evaluators to describe the object of the study in depth, from various perspectives, and at different points in time.

Now let's look at the second standard in the Feasibility set. It is the Political Viability standard. It advises the evaluator to anticipate the different positions of various interest groups, so that their cooperation may be obtained, and so that possible attempts by any of these groups to curtail the evaluation or to bias or misapply the results can be averted or counteracted. When planning a study, the evaluator should ask the relevant interest groups to provide their perspectives and advice. Also, before agreeing to conduct an evaluation, the evaluator should make sure that it is politically viable. The evaluator should also obtain written guarantees that the evaluation team will have access to the relevant data and control over final

editing. As a final example, this standard advises the evaluator to provide the client groups with periodic progress reports so that the study's reported outcomes aren't surprises to any of the groups and so that these groups may comment on draft reports.

The fourth and final standard I want to look at is the first standard in the Propriety set. It is the Formal Obligation standard. It directs that obligations of the formal parties to an evaluation should be agreed to in writing, so that these parties are obligated to adhere to all conditions of the agreement or formally to renegotiate it. Among the suggested contents of the written agreement are the audiences for study reports, the questions to be investigated, the data gathering and analysis methods, the reporting plan, the work schedule, the budget, and contract termination procedures. In my experience, it is crucial to work out an advance contract to guide the work. proper contracts can forestall a whole host of disputes that may arise during the study.

This concludes my discussion of the standards. I will close by summarizing what I have said.

Closing

All professionals in physical education are involved in setting policies to guide their services. These educators need evaluation studies that assist them to both set policies and examine the implementation and outcomes of the policies.

Four general issues essentially determine the success or failure of policy studies. These are the issues of utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy. The Joint Committee Standards were developed precisely to help evaluators address these issues.

If you have not already done so, I recommend that you obtain a copy of the Standards. I am confident that you will find them to be useful for planning and conducting policy evaluations.